



Red Letter City
Fasting
July 3, 2016
Courage Church, Detroit, MI.

I want to start today's message by telling you a story.

and it only sort of, by the force of my hand, has to do with today's message..

and it has a little to do with the fourth of July but really doesn't have to do with the fourth of July.

Ten years ago yesterday (July 2, 2006), I brought Dawn with me to this big 4th of July party in Lansing at Mount Hope Church. They had fireworks, and a car show, and all sorts of fun things. It was just packed with people so everyone that I knew was there.

And Dawn and I had just met a couple of weeks before then. And even though it was so obvious that we were "a thing" (at least I thought it was!) every time I introduced her to my friends that day, if they would begin to take the conversation that way... like, they were looking to ask us if we were dating, she had a way of shutting it down before they even could ask. And the couple times she was asked, she had this beautiful way of making me feel like I didn't have a chance. I remember I introduced her to Jerome that evening, and he asked us if we were together, and she was so quick to say "no."

And then we met up with another couple who was actually dating and didn't say things that made people think they weren't... and I remember when the sun went down we all decided that we wanted to play Tennis. When I was younger I played a lot of tennis but even at that point in my life I didn't really play anymore. But we wanted to play, so we went to East Lansing where there were courts that had lights so we could play into the night.

So Dawn and I played against them, and of course we whooped them.

So badly that they decided to go home... but then Dawn and I kept playing.

And of course I whooped her.

And then when we got tired we sat down next to each other on the same side of the court against the fence to catch our breath.

and then we began talking, and dreaming a little together. We had only met each other less than a month ago, but it was obvious that we shared so many dreams. It was obvious that our hearts were so lined up with each other... and I don't even remember what we talked about that night, but it definitely was one of those moments when I felt like I was talking to the woman who would be my wife.

And then, as we sat on the courts, the clock struck midnight.

And when the clock struck midnight, all of the lights in the tennis court we were sitting at shut down. and it was totally dark.

and it didn't even phase us. We just kept talking, and dreaming, and laughing.

until eventually I realized, at some point, you have to stop giving this girl a reason to tell people that we aren't dating.

So I, some how, in some way mustered up the strength to ask her to be my girlfriend.

And shockingly she said yes.

And because the clock had already struck midnight and the tennis court lights had already gone out, it put us into a new day. July 3, 2006.

So ten years ago today, Dawn and I began dating.

and I just wanted to share that with you. And not that there is really any appropriate way to tie that into a message about fasting, but I will kind of try at least a little.

Because the truth is, we care what other people think. We care about peoples perceptions of us, and we care about peoples opinion. I wanted people to get the impression that Dawn and I were a thing even before we had actually *agreed* to be one... and so I was disturbed by the way that she talked to my friends who all asked the same question.

Because it shut down what I was trying to create.

and as frustrated as that made me, ultimately she was right.

Because She didn't want to send a message that we were something...

that we weren't.

and that dilemma is as old as time, and is ultimately what Jesus is confronting in this whole section of Matthew 6.

He was addressing a group of people who wanted to look like they were something, when in all honesty, they weren't actually that thing.

They cared more about looking good than they did about being good. So when they gave, they would smash their coins into the brass receptacles to make an echoing sound to draw attention to their giving.

When they pray, they would babble these long winded, meaningless prayers in public areas for the reason of the public hearing them.

and when they fasted they would disfigure their faces so that everyone who saw them knew how hard it must be for them to be giving up so much.

But for all of them, Jesus says, "they received their reward."

If you give so that others will see you give, when others see you give, you got what you wanted.

If you pray so that others will hear you pray, then when others hear you prayer, you got what you wanted.

and if you fast so that other people will see that you are fasting, then when other people realize that you are fasting, you got what you wanted.

And that is your reward.

It is pretty amazing, that God, time and time again, has this amazing way of giving us exactly what we want.

Most of us read this “you have received your reward” and it sounds almost like Jesus is being mean... like he is mad that someone saw you pray and so now something bad is going to happen.

But all Jesus is saying here is “in your heart, the only reason you pray is to be noticed... *you got noticed*... you got what you want.”

So we looked at giving.
Then last week we looked at praying.

So now lets take a look at the third work of righteousness that Jesus addresses here, fasting.

If you would open up your bibles with me to Matthew 6:16-18 -

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Lets Pray.

I have anticipated for several weeks the awkwardness that comes with teaching a message about fasting on the same day that the church is having a community lunch.

so let me just say this right now...

we are NOT calling a corporate fast today.
we are NOT telling you not to eat our community lunch.

it was not a ploy to get you to church, pretending that we would feed you but instead calling you to a fast. There really is going to be food after service.

in fact, we are telling you the opposite. Jesus is in the things that bring people together, and we are excited to share a meal together today.

The whole point of Jesus' text here is to say that when you fast, it is a decision that is between you and God.

its like that for all three of these issues. Giving. Praying. Fasting.

But when the goal becomes being seen by others you take away the power that lied in you doing them. Suddenly something that was created to be incredibly rewarding has been stripped of its reward, because you cared more about other people's opinion of you, than you did about what God had in store for you.

You traded something eternal for something temporal.

a quick recap...

Jesus begins this works of righteousness section by saying "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."

The literal is "in order to be a public show for them"

and then in each category, Jesus goes on to say, WHEN you do these things... these are the boundaries... He is very intentional to say "WHEN." because these are things that everyone should be doing... Jesus makes the assumption that we are doing these things, that part is obvious. But he says that "when you do these things, don't be like the hypocrites."

the word hypocrite means an actor or a stage player...

it comes from theater, which in the first century were these very simple shows in which a person would stand on a stage and where a mask that conveyed something different than what that person really was.

so it is a much broader term than someone who lives a double life or someone who condemns something and then does it themselves.

We like to think that a hypocrite is someone whose life doesn't line up with their words... but its actually so much bigger than that.

A hypocrite is someone who's heart does not line up with their life.

When they do even the "right things," they are doing them for the wrong reasons. They are acting.

Their entire Spiritual life is a show that they are putting on for others.

The writer of Hebrews (10:16) says "I will put my word on their hearts," Jeremiah says the same thing... and that is the goal. The goal is to do things naturally, because the word of God has been written on your heart... but the word is not written on the heart of a hypocrite... instead they just make it look like it is.

and the thing that is so sad about this, is a hypocrite is *content* in that. They are content in being seen as good rather than seeing a real change in their own life.

Proverbs 20:6 says:

"Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love... but a faithful man, who can find?"

It is very common to find someone who says they are good, and looks good... someone who gives when people watch and who fasts when they know people will applaud them... but a person who does these things behind closed doors for the sake of nothing but Jesus... who can find?

It is a rarity.

So... fasting. Jesus starts by saying:

"when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others."

This is what would happen.

When a person would fast, it was a common practice to go out of their way to make it abundantly clear that they were fasting. If it wasn't enough to see how hungry they obviously looked, so they would go so far as to put ashes on their faces.

Have you ever had a bonfire and then after everything cools off a couple of days later... you go and try to clean up the ashes? If you get any on your hands or arms, it will leave like a chalky black on you. If you were to put that on your face it could easily look like you had been crying relentlessly. Or like you really need to wash your face.

They took extreme measures to make sure that *if* they were going to sacrifice in such a large way, it was going to be noticed by their peers...

...and What they would do then, we do now. and it may not be with ashes, but our hearts are the same.

We are quick to tell people the reason why we can't go to the restaurant with them after church, instead of graciously declining their invitation. We make comments when we see our friend eating a candy bar...

“That looks so good!” prompting them to offer to share with us, and opening the door for us to tell them why we can not partake, in said candy bar.

“Oh, no... I am fasting.”

Jesus says “go the other way!” He tells us to go out of our way to make it look like we aren’t fasting... to make it look like today is business as usual... and he tells us that when that happens, something happens supernaturally and suddenly there is a reward that is coming to us that doesn’t come when we do it for the approval of others but we do it for the right reasons.

Now, Jesus is very clear as to how we fast... privately.
Jesus is very clear that we DO fast, as he says WHEN YOU FAST.

But I think that one of the greatest questions that people have is:

Why do we fast?

and there are a wide range of answers to this question. I am going to list a few reasons that might inspire you to do a fast, but there is one in particular that I am going to focus the rest of the message on after that, that I believe encapsulates all of them.

Now, this is not about corporate fasting. If the church leadership calls for a corporate fast, you should be a part of that, but we are talking about you making a personal decision for your life to fast.

A few reasons to do a personal fast:

- When life is clearly changing (direction)
- When there is an emergency or urgent need
- When you are mourning
- For your health
- When the Holy Spirit leads you to fast

But there is one reason that I believe sums them all up:

Clarity.

In Matthew 9:14, something happens that confuses a lot of people when they read it, about fasting. The disciples of John the baptist ask Jesus a very interesting question. It is especially interesting considering the way that in the sermon on the mount Jesus says "When you fast..." implying that it was assumed that his followers would fast.

But the question that the disciples asked Jesus was this... they say:

"we fast."

"The Pharisees fast."

"but your followers do NOT fast."

Why?

and this is what he says (Matthew 9:15):

"Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."

What is Jesus saying?

For years I had always thought that we fasted so that God could move on our behalf. Like it is this desperate plea to God asking him to finally take some action in our lives.

But the more that I studied the red letters of Jesus and the sermon on the mount, the more I realized that Jesus has already giving us everything that we need to know, to equip us to bring what is in heaven to earth.

He has equipped US TO TAKE ACTION IN OUR LIVES. and in other peoples lives.

and then you read what Jesus says to Johns disciples here, and suddenly it starts to make sense that maybe God is not waiting for us to fast so that he can move. Because He is already moving.

Jesus was moving the whole time he was with the disciples.
but then, they had a clear view into what he was doing.

and I believe it is like that today.

I believe that God is at work in our communities and in our world and in
eternity already.

I believe that God is talking to you, and He is talking to me, already.

But I don't always hear him.

and it is not because he is not speaking.

See, in Matthew 9 Jesus tells these followers of John the Baptist that the
reason that his disciples don't fast is because they are with him every day.
They have a clear window into exactly what Jesus is doing, and how he is
moving, and what is happening.

It is right in front of them.

But what Jesus tells them is, "I won't always be right in front of you." There
is going to come a time when Jesus is going to go to the cross and die for
our sins, and will resurrect and will ascend and when that time comes,

then there will be fasting.

Because when Jesus was here on earth it was pretty clear, the way that his
Kingdom was invading this one. But he is telling us that a time is coming,
and of course we know that now that time has come... when he will not be
there (in the flesh).

But he is still going to be moving.

Jesus is still at work in your life.

He is still at work in our city and he is still at work in our world.

Fasting shows a longing in us for the things of heaven to be revealed, and made manifest here on this earth.

but I don't believe that fasting necessarily causes God to move, as much as I believe it creates space in our life so that we can see how he is moving.

I just don't buy into this view of God that says that he is a sleeping giant somewhere waiting for me to do something that wakes him up. God is not just sitting in heaven waiting for us to die so that he can either share eternity with us or send us away forever...

he is our supplier in our every moment and He is as close to me as the air that I breathe.

I don't always see him moving... but it is not because he is not moving.

It is because the things in my life are taking up so much space in my heart and in my mind...

that I'm looking the other way. and the whole time God is over here saying "I am right here!!! I am doing something amazing!"

there are voices that I have allowed in my life to be louder than the voice of God.

and one of those voices is my own!

Do you think it is possible, that you have missed whatever God is trying to speak into your life and your circumstance, because you spent so much time talking about it and no time at all trying to listen to what God is saying to you about it.

If you are constantly talking, you are never going to hear.

There are so many voices out there.

and I believe that we fast so that we can clear away those voices.

Even if you were to do a secular study on the process of fasting, you would be amazed at what it does to your body, and your mind.

It cleanses you. You begin to think more clearly. You begin to reason in more reasonable ways. You see things differently. It may be hard at first but as your body begins to rid itself of all of the toxins that we probably should have *never* put in them in the first place, and as you stay hydrated... your mind begins to see things more and more clearly.

You begin to physically feel better, you begin to have clarity. I have never done a fast that didn't AT LEAST end with me feeling more motivated and inspired to do the work of God.

God knows what he is doing! He knows how our bodies work.

we fast to disconnect from the world... to get rid of the clutter, and the garbage that is constantly in front of us...

and then we couple that with prayer... in a quiet place, where during that time no other voices can drag us into all of these different directions...

and through prayer, we connect to God.

I think that there is a bigger idea here that we often miss when we talk about issues like fasting. We hear "cut off" when God is saying "connect."

we hear it and we think, that is going to take a toll. and we count all of the areas of our lives that are going to be sabotaged by taking part in this ancient practice and so we make every excuse for why we can't do it... not understanding what we are missing.

I know that Dawn and I told you this before on one of the messages we did together... but God told us to go to Detroit while we were fasting. He made it clear as day. It was during a fast that our pastor in New York City told me that he thought that Dawn and I were going to be lead pastors. It was during a fast that Pastor Chilly and Pastor Kevin were having a prayer meeting and they were praying and fasting for God to put Detroit on someone's heart...

and the next day Pastor Kevin had an email from me about possibly coming to Detroit.

Every single one of us was fasting during that time. And God showed us all of the steps, and the way He was working... and he brought the entire thing together.

and for years I have caught tiny glimpses of God dropping Detroit into my heart... moments when I would see something online, or read an article... I remember reading one article in particular while I was riding the train in New York, I had an hour commute that day into the city and I was reading about how a program was giving free houses to writers who would commit to doing their next writing project here, and it just made me leap. Even when I would be visiting here for a baseball game and something just begin to stir in me... because I truly believe that it was God's plan all along.

But it wasn't until I totally cleared out the clutter from my own life and from my mind that I could see what God was actually *showing me*, and what He was doing, and how I could get on board with it.

God spoke (like he often does).
And for once we actually heard.

Now,

a question that many people like to ask, is "what do I fast?"

What do I give up?
What do I eliminate from my life for a season?

I have always said that God cares a whole lot more about your heart than He does the way that it all plays out for you.... And that is why so many churches say that fasting is not about what you give up particularly... it doesn't have to be food.

And so even when we call corporate fasts here, we give options because we want everyone to take part in some way... be it social media, or music, or TV, or whatever it may be.

But I want to try and make a *different* case for you today. Not because those things are wrong, because ultimately it *is* a matter of the heart.

But as far as I can tell, the way Jesus demonstrated fasting, is fasting everything.

If you are serving God, there WILL come a time when life will hit you so hard, that the answer for you WILL BE to fast *everything*.

and hear me out on this... because if you take part in some of it I think that there is a benefit to you, in the Old Testament Daniel had a modified fast, as did others... but I want you to get the most out of whatever you do in your life, and when I read what Jesus says, I think there is a bigger idea here than just giving up one particular area of your life.

In the bible, when people fasted, one way or another, they fasted food.

Because food affected their minds, and it had a hold of them in a way that God was supposed to. And entertainment and Facebook and instagram can certainly have a hold on your life that God is supposed to have, and so when you do fast, I highly recommend shutting down all of those things during that time...

but I also want to encourage you to try fasting food when you fast.

Because if you can clear your mind by what you stop putting into your body, and then NOT fill it with the garbage you read all day on your phones...

then suddenly the only voice in that moment is the voice of God, the word of God, and the healthy relationships that you allow to remain open.

There is only one time recorded in the bible of Jesus fasting... He drank only water and ate no food, but he also retreated by himself, with no distractions... putting it in today's context, Jesus fasted facebook, he fasted

his cell phone, he fasted television, he ate nothing and he drank only water, for 40 days and 40 nights. *Nothing.* for 40 days and 40 nights.

and it was right before he began his public ministry.

The progression in Matthew, leading up to the sermon on the mount, which is the first known sermon that Jesus gave, is this:

In Matthew 3, John the Baptist baptizes Jesus, signifying his ministry is beginning. The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove, and a voice from heaven said, "this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17)

and then the bible says that Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. And that was when Jesus fasted. For 40 days and 40 nights, Jesus fasted. and the whole time he is fasting, the devil comes at him with bigger and bigger promises.

Have you ever noticed that?

The temptations get harder and harder. Jesus is offered more and more to do the opposite of what he is supposed to do.

Or what about this?

When John baptizes Jesus, and the heavens open up and the dove descends and you hear God's voice, what does he say?

This is my... son.

Then Jesus goes away, and he fasts. and as he is fasting, what does the devil say to Him?

IF YOU ARE the Son of God... turn these stones into bread.

God spoke. The Devil questioned.

God made it clear as day. It was plain. It was obvious. He opened up the whole sky to proclaim that Jesus is His Son, and yet the first thing that the devil goes after, is what God already made clear.

and if God promises you something in your life... then the Devil is going to work overtime to make God look like a liar. He is going to do everything he can to prevent what work God is doing in your life from being completed in you...

and he knows he can't stop God...

so he focuses all of his energy on you.

But remember this. I have said this to you a thousand times, I'll say it until I am blue in the face. The Devil has only ONE WEAPON and that weapon is LIES.

He can't do anything that he can't convince you of.

Do you want to take defeat the devil in your life? Then take away his power. The only power he has to work in you is what he can convince you of.

Whatever it is that is going on in your life right now, it is not too big for God unless you minimize Him by believing that God is smaller than your problems.

But the truth is, if you do that... your problems are not your biggest problem.

And I don't say that to be insensitive and I don't say that to downplay the very real struggles that people face because we all face them...

But if you BELIEVE the words that you pray when you pray the Lord's Prayer... and you believe that God is as close to you as the air that you breathe and you believe that he will provide for you and you believe that you have Power of Attorney in the NAME ABOVE ALL NAMES and yet you still view your problems as being too big for God....

If that is you... your problems are not the problem.

Your perspective of them is.

It is not about what is actually happening right now, it is about the scope through which you view it through.

Because if all you see are problems... then all you will ever have will be problems.

The first thing that the devil tried to do to Jesus in Matthew 4 was get him to question the words that God spoke. Because the Devil knows that if he can cut down someones spirit, and get them to a place where they aren't sure anymore who they are, or who is really on their side...

then He can use more lies to rewrite them into whoever it is that he wants them to be.

He did the same thing in the garden of Eden... (Gen. 3)

"Did God really tell you not to eat of the trees in the garden?"

"You will not die... God knows that when you eat it, you will be like Him."

and suddenly these people who moments ago literally walked with God in perfect tranquility, were giving up everything for a piece of fruit.

That is what he does. He lies. He sells us something that turns our hearts from what is right.

It is his only weapon... but he is so good at it.

John 8:44 says that "the Devil is the Father of lies."

I wish that I could tell you that the moment you turn your life to Jesus it is all going to get easier, but its not.

I can't sell you something that is not true.

When you give your life to Jesus, there are going to be voices. There are going to be lies spoken against you. There are going to be lies that creep into your heart and into your mind.

When you decide to get baptized... and make that public confession for Jesus, the Devil is going to come against you and try as hard as he can to make you eat those words...

The moment Jesus got baptized, and his ministry began... he was under constant attack. Because He was God's best, and the Devil knew he had to do everything possible to bring him down.

and if Jesus was tempted, and the Devil obviously knew what he was up against when he tried to tempt Jesus... then why would the Devil leave you alone while you do something significant for the Kingdom of God? Why would he sit back and twiddle his thumbs while you change the world?

He won't.

He will only leave you alone if you do nothing.

If you aren't a threat, then you aren't worth his effort.

But the moment that your life becomes about something real, then I promise you it is going to get real.

You are going to doubt. You are going to question yourself. You are going to face things that don't make any sense.

and if you give up because it feels like it is all just too much, then I am sorry, but You have been sold a lie.

Because you were created for something great. God has plans for you, and they are amazing!

Now,

I know that it may feel like I have detoured from the message about fasting, but I haven't.

Because the truth is, our lives are brought down by what we let into our hearts and our minds.

our lives are brought down when we can't discern.

our lives are brought down by clutter.

Most of the time, life is not good on one side... and bad on the other.

Its not truth on one side... and a lie on the other.

and all you have to do is chose door number one, and ignore door number two, and everything will be okay.

Usually, at least in our culture, it looks more like this: it is a slew of things that surround our lives, and the Devil throws as much in the mix as he can with the hope that somewhere in your pile of options, truth gets buried.

The best men and women who I have seen fall, have fallen because so many voices got into their heads whispering so many lies that before long, they couldn't discern any longer which ones were truth, and which ones were lies.

The lines began to blur together.

And the works of righteousness that Jesus describes here, by giving in secret, not for show, and then by praying in secret the Lord's prayer... and by fasting... these are the things in life that bring that line into focus.

Fasting brings focus.

If I take off my glasses, I can hardly see anything. I can't read my notes... You all look like a blur. I honestly would have a hard time knowing who is who, especially when we get a few rows back.

But the moment that I put them back on, I could call most of you out by name. Because I know you.

and I know what you look like. And when my eyes are functioning the way that they are supposed to be I see you the way that you are supposed to look.

And it's familiar. Because I've already spent time with most of you. I haven't forgotten what you look like, but without my glasses I just see something different, but I still know what is there. It is written into my brain so the moment that I see do you, I know what I am seeing.

That is the heart behind all the people in the bible who say how important it is that the word be written on our hearts. Paul says it. The writer or Hebrews says it. Jeremiah says it. The Psalmist says it.

Because as long as it is in there all along, sometimes all it takes is putting your glasses back on, so you can see it again.

And Jesus' disciples did not fast when He was there, because every moment of every day they were reminded of truth, because it was right in front of them. If they had a question, Jesus had an answer. If something was wrong, Jesus knew it, and he spoke about it... and he clarified.

Jesus was to them like eyes before they needed glasses. He showed them everything.

But when Jesus was not with them in the flesh anymore... Fasting became a regular practice... because there would be times when it would feel like they had taken off those glasses. And they needed clarity. And they knew that they had total access to that clarity through the Holy Spirit and that is why they did.

Because heaven might not be manifest in the flesh anymore through Jesus on earth... but there are things up there that can be made manifest through us if let them. But we will never let them IF WE NEVER SEE THEM, and we will never see them if we are constantly clouded by all of the other voices out there vying for our attention...

But fasting, and prayer... and all the works of righteousness, they are things that write the word of God onto our hearts. They create space. They make it clear... and even when we take off our glasses, and we see things dimly, if these things become natural in our lives then we still know what's there, because it is written on our hearts.

When Dawn and I were sitting on that tennis court that night... we had just spent the whole day together. Before that we had spent several other days together. We had gotten to know each other, and I knew.

This needs to be my girl.

and the moment those lights went out... and I couldn't see her in all the light I had gotten used to seeing her in... I still knew.

SHE IS THE ONE THAT I WANT.

I knew what she looked like. I knew who she was. In the light, and in the dark, because I had dedicated those days to learning about her, and to interacting with her, and to getting closer to her.

and a light didn't change who she was.

But if I didn't know her, it could have changed what I saw.

Guys, in your life, lights are going to go out sometimes.

But God is the same in the light, and in the dark.

But that doesn't mean you see him the same.

Unless you know him.

if your view of God changes based on your circumstances then you don't know the God that I know. and these works of righteousness that Jesus makes *very* clear... HIS FOLLOWERS DO ALL OF THEM...

GIVING.

PRAYING.

FASTING.

this is how you know God. We talked about knowing God a ton when we talked about giving. You can't say that you know God if you don't give. You can't disconnect from the world if you don't fast, and you can't hear from God if you don't pray.

The fruit of your life will be only as consistent as the God that you follow.

If your view of God is not constant, your life won't be either.

May the word of the Lord be written on your hearts.

May your giving be in secret... but may you give often and liberally.
May your praying be in secret, always reminding you that God is present in every aspect of your life.

and may your fasting stay between you and God...

bringing clarity to your life, as the word comes alive in your heart.